



76: If you love the girl by cali-chan

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"You should try not to get mad, you know. They only tease you because it gets such a rise out of you. But when you look past all the annoying stuff, they're actually really happy for you."

It was a lazy Saturday afternoon, and the party was hanging out in Mike's basement. Well, *most* of the party, at least—one Saturday a month, Chief Hopper would take Eleven to visit her mother and aunt, and it just happened to fall that week, so El was absent.

Not that they were doing anything important, of course. Half of them were broke so they couldn't go to the arcade, or the movie theater, or the comic book store. It was already starting to get chilly, so going to the public pool was out. Plus, it had been raining on and off all day, so pretty much anything else outdoors was a no-go.

So instead they'd stayed in and played Monopoly. Well, not all of them. Max had... *opinions* about the lameness of Monopoly, so she'd spent most of the afternoon making use of the new dartboard Mike's parents had given him for Christmas. Mike couldn't throw darts to save his life, but Max was actually pretty good at it.

Will himself had started out playing with the guys, but it didn't take long for him to go bankrupt; Lucas kept pointing out how he "didn't have enough guile" for Monopoly and that's why he always lost first. Will didn't mind, honestly; his friends, particularly Lucas and Dustin, tended to get a bit... *intense* about Monopoly, and he would rather not be in the middle of that, so instead he pulled his coloring pencil set and one of his sketch pads from his bag, and went over to the couch to work on some drawings that were still unfinished.

"And Lucas rolls a seven and— *ooh*, that means you're stopping at

North Carolina Avenue!" Dustin exclaimed, as Lucas sighed and leaned forward to move his game piece along the board.

"Would you quit narrating every single turn we take?" Lucas grumbled as his piece, indeed, fell on North Carolina Avenue, which was a property Dustin owned. "This isn't a baseball game."

"Did you just say 'ooh'?" Max asked from the side with a snort.

"Yes, I did, and I have every right to be giddy because I do believe this means, my friend, that you owe me double rent!" Dustin pointed at Lucas, who glared at him, but started counting the money either way. Not like he had much of a choice, really.

"I don't even want to stay in your stinking duplex anyway," he muttered under his breath as he handed Dustin a wad of Monopoly bills. Dustin fanned himself with them and pretended like they smelt like real money, just to be obnoxious.

Mike was chuckling as well, but then he caught sight of his watch and straightened up in his chair, suddenly at attention. "Guys, we gotta start wrapping up. It's almost four," he pointed out as he started to put his money back into the box over Dustin's protests. "El's probably on her way over already."

"Wait, wait." Lucas paused halfway through handing Mike his own set of bills, staring at his friend in disbelief. "Is that why you didn't want to do our campaign today? Because you have a *date*?"

Mike glared at him. "It's not a date." He snagged the bills out of Lucas's half-outstretched hand. "I'm tutoring her in Biology." That made sense to Will. School had only started a few weeks ago, and everything was still new to Eleven; she was smart and she learned things quickly, but she still needed help a lot of the time, and Mike was always willing to provide it without a second thought.

Max let out an amused huff as she aimed a dart in front of her face with one eye closed. "Is that what the kids are calling it these days?" she quipped before letting the dart fly. It landed inside the triple ring, just right of the bullseye. She was really good at that game.

Dustin huffed. "Well, I feel slighted. Why did she ask *you* to tutor her? I'm better than you at science."

Mike scowled in his direction. "No, you're not."

"Uh, yes, I am," Dustin retorted with an emphatic nod of his head as he handed over his own set of fake money. "I'm better than all of you at science," he asserted, in a tone that suggested anyone who didn't see that was fooling themselves.

"Uh, no, you're not," Lucas shot back, his indignation nearly identical to Mike's.

"Guys, do you have to turn *everything* into a competition?" Will called out from the couch, ever the mediator. He loved how spirited his friends were, but they could get downright ridiculous sometimes.

"It doesn't matter, anyway, Dustin," Max chimed in as she prepared to throw another dart. "You *know* why she went to Mike." The dart flew, and landed a little farther away from the bullseye than the last one had. She frowned at it; Will still thought it was pretty good.

Mike's scowl now turned to their redhead friend. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Max didn't answer him as she moved to get the darts off the dartboard, but Lucas did. "Oh, El," he started doing an exaggerated impression of Mike, complete with moony eyes. "El. I'll teach you everything you need to know about Biology. Let's start with human anatomy."

Mike scoffed, slumping back in his chair as he crossed his arms. "That's such an old joke," he grumbled, glaring at Lucas.

His annoyed expression was enough to also get Dustin on his case. "Yes, Mike," he started in the most *awful* falsetto Will had ever heard in his life, and it sent him into guffaws. "Please teach me everything about the human body. Especially the places where it feels good—" He abruptly cut himself off when something flew right past his face. "Did you just throw a hotel at me?" he asked Mike, wide-eyed. Then he turned to Lucas. "He just threw a hotel at me!"

Mike glared. "Be grateful it wasn't a shoe," he sentenced, and Will laughed so hard his pencil fell out of his hand and rolled under the couch.

Max was laughing, too, but she shook her head as she turned back to the dartboard. "Come on, guys, give him a break," she said as planted her feet steady to aim again. "If he says it's not a date, then it's not a date."

"Thank you!" Mike retorted, clearly feeling vindicated for once in the afternoon. Now, Will might be "guileless" or whatever, but even he could tell something was fishy about Max's sudden support.

His suspicions were confirmed when Max continued speaking like nobody had said a thing. "After all, does it *really* count as a date if they just stay in and suck face all evening?" She let the dart fly and let out a loud "whoop!" when it hit right at the bullseye.

"Augh," Mike groaned, and then dropped his head down, banging it against the surface of the table repeatedly in frustration. The boys all laughed. "Why am I even friends with you jerks?" Mike muttered once he stopped inflicting himself pain with the furniture.

Will bent down to look for his errant pencil just as Lucas spoke again. "Cool it, man. We're just teasing." Will couldn't see his friend's face since he was now hanging upside down from his seat on the couch with the back of his head to them, but he could hear very clearly the mirth in Lucas's voice. Dustin was still giggling.

Max wasn't laughing, but as Will straightened up again he saw her smirk, and then she started singing. "*Cool it now...*" Obviously Lucas's words had sparked some sort of recognition as she started bobbing her head to a poppy rhythm. "*You got to cool it now...*"

It only took half a second for Dustin to catch on. "*Ooooh, watch out!*" he sang back the harmony, standing up from his seat with a big grin on his face.

Max put the darts down on the side table and pointed straight at Mike with a smirk. "*You're gonna lose control,*" she sang, Lucas excitedly joining in with a hoot, and before Mike was done rolling his

eyes, the three of them were singing and dancing around the Wheeler's basement like the careless kids they were.

Will wasn't much of a singer or a dancer, but he did his best to clap along from the couch and laughed as Lucas spun Max around, long red hair flying around her as he did, and Dustin tried to drag them into some sort of choreography that should never be attempted in public unless you actually mean to poke someone's eye out on purpose.

It wasn't the type of music that any of them liked, he knew, and Jonathan would probably have an aneurysm if he walked through the door and saw them all dancing to it, but it played on the radio all the time so all of them knew it. Lucas, who knew the lyrics better than the others ("What? My sister plays this at home 24/7!"), took over lead singing when the other two got sick of repeating the chorus over and over. Dustin tried his hand at the rap parts and failed utterly, but it only made them all laugh even more.

Even Mike was grudgingly smiling by the time the song started wrapping up, which Will was happy to see. Even when they were teasing each other, they knew it was all in good fun. That's why they were all such good friends.

Well, that and teaming up to fight interdimensional monsters, he guessed.

Then Dustin's dance moves turned into a series of hip thrusts and Lucas and Max started discussing *hey, do you think the lights flicker when they make out?* and *nah, but I bet stuff starts flying around them when they do* and that's as far as the fun and games went.

"Okay, that's it," Mike declared as he stood up and glared at all of them. "Out! All of you. You can't be here when El arrives," he sentenced in a sharp tone that made it sound final.

"What? Why?" Dustin whined, only narrowly avoiding being hit with Max's hair by taking a quick step to the side—the girl was still spinning in an effort to prove to the boys that she didn't get dizzy. "I wanted to say hi to her!"

"Not when you're in this mood, you won't!" Mike retorted with an emphatic shake of his head. "You'll just confuse her with your stupid innuendo, and then *I'm* going to have to explain, like always."

"You can't hog El all to yourself, you fiend!" Max chimed in as she spun. Then she stopped abruptly, let out a quick "whoa!" and barely managed not to fall on top of Will as she tripped over her own feet. But she wasn't dizzy. Nope. *Really*.

"She just said the word fiend," Dustin pointed out as all of this was going down. "Can we all agree *now* that using the word fiend officially makes her a nerd?" He'd been trying to get Max to admit that hanging out with nerds made her a nerd by association for months, to no avail.

"Screw you, asshole! I'm *awesome*," the redhead retorted as she knelt down to tie her shoelaces. Totally not waiting for the room to stop spinning. Not at all. Will chuckled.

"Wait, wait," Lucas said again as he shouldered his backpack and picked Max's up from the floor. "You mean you've been explaining innuendo to Eleven? Like... about sex and stuff?" he asked, eyebrows rising high on his forehead.

"Oh, shit, no way!" Dustin intervened, grinning like the cat that ate the canary. "So, what *else* have you already explained to her, Mikey?" He wiggled his eyebrows up and down, and for a second Will was sure he was going to do that purr thing he loved doing, but thankfully he didn't.

Mike went so red, Will was sure his face was about to explode. "What? No! I haven't— *shut up, Dustin!*"

The other three cracked up, and Will snorted, but at the same time he felt bad for his friend. Everybody knew that "shut up" was the ultimate comeback of those who had no better retorts to use, so he decided to try and give Mike a hand. "It makes sense when you think about it, though," he pointed out. "I mean... it's not like she can ask *Hopper* about stuff like this."

He knew he had said the wrong thing when four wide-eyed faces

turned to look directly at him. Mike had now gone ghostly pale, like he was seeing his life flash before his eyes— which, given the terrifying mental images of Hopper finding out they were "corrupting" his daughter that Will belatedly realized his innocent suggestion had inspired, he probably was.

"No," Mike started, though it sounded more like an involuntary interjection than an actual coherent thought. "No. Hopper can't—" He shook his head sharply, as if to Etch-A-Sketch erase the bad thoughts from his mind. "You know what? Just go, guys. I really do need to help El study and we don't need any distractions."

"Don't sweat it, Wheeler," Max finally says, pushing away from the arm of the couch which she had been leaning against this whole time — clearly the dizziness she totally did not experience had diminished by now. "Next time El wonders about that kinda stuff, just tell her to ask me. I'll explain a thing or two."

"Please don't," Mike muttered as she walked past him and shouldered her backpack, which Lucas handed her. Personally, Will didn't see what was so wrong with Max explaining that kinda stuff to El— the redhead was always the first one to complain that the boys were gross when they pushed the lewd jokes a bit too far, so El might benefit from a girl's point of view regarding those matters.

Then again, Max could be a little... unpredictable, so maybe Mike had a point, too.

"So, tomorrow at El's for D&D?" Lucas asked as he and Max were just about to go up the stairs. Mike nodded and both waved at them as they went up.

Dustin was still throwing all his stuff into his backpack— he always brought so much crap with him when he hung out at someone else's place— so he lingered for a bit longer, while Mike started putting all the Monopoly stuff back in its box. Will watched them from his spot on the couch; he knew when Mike said "all of them" should leave, he didn't really mean him.

Mike reminded Dustin to pick up the pieces that were on the floor, which Dustin did (albeit complaining once again about having a hotel

thrown at his head), and he was just handing the little green piece back to Mike when Max's voice came from upstairs. "Move your ass, Henderson! You've got to tow me home, remember?" Will hoped Mike's mom wasn't around to hear the exclamation.

Dustin shook his head. "What's the point of having your own set of wheels if you still need other people to haul you around?" he asked them with a resigned sigh, but it was a rhetorical question. Dustin's house was the closest to Max's, so usually he was the one who had to tow her at least part of the way when she was on her skateboard—he'd usually tow her all the way up to the top of the hill his house was located on, and from that point on it was downstream and much easier for her to skate the rest of the way to her place.

He shouldered his backpack and adjusted his hat atop his head. "Well, I'll see you guys tomorrow." He turned to go up the stairs before pausing for a moment and turning back around. Grinning, he signaled to Mike with finger guns. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do." With that advice, he made his way upstairs.

Mike rolled his eyes. Will laughed. "I honestly don't think there's much he *wouldn't* do," he noted, chuckling.

"Don't remind me," Mike said with a groan. He put the Monopoly box away with the rest of his board games and put his school bag on top of the table so he could take out his notes and the biology books he'd loaned from the library the day before.

"Good point. That's a road we *really* don't want to go down." Will chortled. "Sorry. I know you don't like being teased. And I'm sorry, too, for the whole Hopper thing," he admitted. "I didn't mean to make things more awkward."

"It's fine, I know you were trying to help," Mike waved off his concern with a sigh before letting himself drop on a chair at the table, opening a green-and-blue Trapper Keeper in front of him so he could comb through his notes. "Do you need to call your mom or Jonathan to come pick you up?"

"No, Nancy said she's going to my place later so I can just go with her," Will answered as he stood up from the couch and stretched his

back; he'd been sitting there for a long while. "Do you want me to go hang out in your room while you and El study? I don't want to distract you or anything."

"Nah, you can stay here if you want." Mike shook his head. "At least you know how to be quiet, unlike those other idiots," he grumbled as he pulled a highlighter pen from his *Back to the Future* pencil case.

Will looked at him for a moment before sitting in the chair directly opposite his. "You should try not to get mad, you know," he suggested. "They only tease you because it gets such a rise out of you. But when you look past all the annoying stuff, they're actually really happy for you."

Mike looked up from the paper in front of him to give Will a confused look. "What do you mean, happy for me?"

Will shrugged. "You and El. That you found your way back to each other."

Mike sighed. "Don't *you* start with that now." He shook his head, grabbing hold of his highlighter again.

"I'm not, I swear." Will hurried to make it clear that he wasn't going to tease Mike about Eleven like their other friends did; that's not what he meant to do. All he was trying to imply was that no matter how the two of them wanted to define their relationship, it was something special, and every one of their friends could see that. He wasn't sure how to put that in words, so he decided to just be upfront about it. He could do that with Mike. They trusted each other that way.

"I'm just saying... you love her, right?"

Mike didn't say anything, but looked down at his hands with so many intense emotions reflected in his expression—fear, confusion, pain, but also determination and joy and awe and devotion—that Will knew he had his answer. He only wondered if Mike himself knew. It seemed like such a massive concept to grasp at their age; Will only knew that's what it was because he could *see* it.

He smiled at his best friend, hoping to convey his support. "Then it doesn't matter what anyone else thinks," he declared with a shake of his head. "Just ignore them. They'll get bored eventually."

Mike stayed quiet for a moment longer, then let go of a breath Will hadn't realized he'd been holding. "Okay, I'll try. But I stand by what I said about them confusing El," he reiterated.

"Yeah, that's really not fair to her," Will agreed. Up until El joined the party, he'd been the most... "innocent," for lack of a better word, of them all. Even now there were still references the other boys and Max threw out that he didn't quite get, and it always made him feel like he was left out of the loop. He could only imagine how much worse that feeling must be for Eleven, who had been isolated from the world for twelve years. "I think they just forget. I'll make sure to remind them when they're doing that."

"Thanks, Will," Mike said genuinely. After that, he went back to reading through his notes and Will went back to finishing the drawing he'd been working on earlier. It was only a few minutes later that Eleven finally arrived.

Will saw her coming down the stairs first, because he was facing that direction. She was wearing a comfy, oversized sweater and jeans, with kicks on her feet, a white headband pulling back her hair, and her trusty Tuxedo Sam backpack cradled in her arms like it was a cute stuffed toy.

"Hi, El," Will said with a smile and a wave, which she returned promptly, and he didn't miss how Mike stood up from his chair the moment he heard her name, like some spring inside him had been coiled tightly, and the mere mention of her presence was enough to loosen the pressure.

"Hey," he greeted her, his tone immediately softening as he smiled at her.

"Hi, Mike," Eleven smiled back at him as she walked up to the table and dropped her bag on the chair next to Mike's. Will quickly started picking up his stuff and moved it back to the couch, so he could leave the entire table to them. He didn't want to be in the way.

"So, how did it go with your mom?" Mike asked carefully.

El's smile quickly fell, and Mike was extending a hand for her to hold before she even said anything. She shrugged. "Same," was the dejected answer, and Will remembered that El's mother had been in some sort of a catatonic state for years, from something the people at Hawkins Lab had done to her. Eleven visited her once a month to try and communicate with her, and as far as he knew, she'd been unsuccessful so far. Apparently that trend continued today.

"I'm sorry," Mike replied, looking sad for her. She took a step forward and grabbed hold of Mike's outstretched hand, but he gently tugged at it to pull her closer, and she all but melted into him, wrapping her arms around Mike's waist, the boy's own rising to envelop her around her shoulders.

Will had been unconscious the first time Mike and Eleven saw each other after an entire year of separation, although their friends liked to make it sound like a scene out of a romantic movie, much to Mike's chagrin. He knew more than any of the others how much Mike had been hurting that year, however, and he'd seen them together enough after they were reunited that he didn't find it surprising how automatically they found their way to each other at all times. It was like there was some sort of gravity pulling them together, like binary stars. Something awe-inspiring, rare. Will's brain couldn't wrap itself around the idea of ever being that comfortable with any girls, or... with anyone he might like that way in the future.

She was just the perfect height to rest her head against the crook of his neck, and he laid his cheek against her hair. And that's when Will *saw*.

It wasn't something that happened only with Mike and Eleven, and to be fair, he didn't think it was something he was *actually* seeing with his eyes. It was more of a feeling in his gut, these flashes of mental images that he sometimes got when he looked at people, or things, or even when he heard certain sounds or when certain things happened.

After everything he'd been through in the past couple of years, any kind of feeling-vision should freak the living daylights out of Will in a second. But unlike the now-memories inflicted on him by the Mind

Flayer, these flashes actually comforted Will. That's why he still hadn't told anyone, and didn't feel like he needed to. Not because they were never scary; some of them were. But he could tell by now that any one of the scary images was just one of many possibilities that could happen, and that made him feel better about it. It made him feel like there was still time to make sure only the good ones came to be.

When he *saw* the flashes around Mike and Eleven, he saw many things. Some of the images showed him pain and fear and frustration, moments when their lives were in danger and moments of confusion and tension. But some showed him happiness and peace and fun, warm kisses and white picket fences and laughing little children, and those were the images he chose to hold on to.

What stood out the most to him, however, was that when he *saw* the possibilities for Mike and Eleven, whether they were good ones or bad ones, one thing was always the same: They were together. In every single one.

That's how he knew.

Then he blinked and the flashes stopped, only a few seconds gone by. Mike and Eleven were still hugging, and Mike was running his fingers down softly through the ends of her hair. Will wondered if he even realized he was doing that.

"Hey, you know what? I just remembered something," Mike said suddenly, in a quiet tone, but it being the only sound in the room other than their breathing, it wasn't hard to hear him. Eleven only nodded slightly to let him know she was listening. "Mr. Clarke— You remember him, right? Our science teacher from middle school?"

El nodded again, though from Will's vantage point it looked more like she was just nuzzling Mike's neck, which would explain why Mike's cheeks suddenly went red. "Well, he told us once that scientists think sometimes people like your mom can hear when someone's talking to them."

Eleven pulled back just far enough to be able to look at him. "Really?" she asked, her expression one of cautious confusion that was familiar

to anyone who knew her. She wasn't doubting Mike's words, she just didn't understand.

Will remembered Mr. Clarke telling them about it very clearly—he'd been talking about coma patients, though, so it may not apply in the case of El's mother necessarily. But hey, if Mike was trying to give the girl some hope, Will wasn't going to say anything to impede that. He owed Eleven his life several times over, so as far as he was concerned, she deserved every bit of happiness that came her way.

Mike smiled at her, enthusiastic. "Yeah! And you said your mom responded to your presence once, right? Even showed you some kind of vision?" Another nod from Eleven. Will wasn't sure what the vision thing was about—he hadn't exactly been told the details of how El found her mother, and a lot of what she could do other than the telekinesis was still a bit of a fuzzy concept to him—but it sounded encouraging.

"Well, then, she probably can hear you, even if she can't respond quite yet," Mike assured her, earnest. "But maybe she will one day," he insisted. "Maybe you just have to keep trying."

Eleven's eyes were wide and she looked at him like he had just revealed to her the meaning of life. The smile she'd been formerly wearing returned in full force as she nodded, enthusiastic. "I will!" She drew closer and squeezed him tightly again. "Thank you," she told him sincerely, her fervent voice slightly muffled against the collar of his polo.

"Anytime," Mike replied, and Will saw him press a kiss to her temple before leaning his cheek against her hair again, closing his eyes momentarily as if savoring the feeling of their embrace.

Will realized belatedly that he'd been staring for far too long. He wasn't sure that either of them even remembered he was literally right there, but he didn't want to embarrass them in case they did, so he stretched his feet out on the couch as silently as he could and went back to working on his drawings, hoping they'd think he was too focused on his art to overhear their conversation.

He'd just put pencil to paper when Nancy's voice floated down from

the top of the stairs. "Will? I'm ready to go! Are you coming?"

Mike and Eleven turned their heads in unison in the direction of Nancy's voice, then the opposite way 'round to look at Will. They stepped apart only mildly awkwardly as Will put all his art supplies back into his bag. He didn't point out that both still seemed reluctant to move more than a foot away from the other.

"I'll be right there!" Will called out to Nancy, before turning to his two friends with a smile, trying to let them know without outright saying it that they had nothing to be embarrassed about. "Sorry, guys, I gotta go. Good luck with Biology," he added as he walked around the table and toward the stairs.

"Yeah," Mike retorted, sounding like Biology was literally the last thing on his mind. "I'll just..." Will saw him take a step forward as if intending to see him out.

Will quickly waved it off. "Nah, don't worry, I can go by myself." After all, it wasn't like he hadn't been in this house hundreds of times throughout his young life. Plus, the front door was directly within sight of the basement door. He wasn't going to suddenly disappear while crossing the Wheeler's foyer.

"I'll see you guys tomorrow," he said over his shoulder as he started climbing up the stairs. He saw Eleven wave him goodbye with a small smile, while Mike serenely watched him go, a hand on the table, just inches away from El's own.

Notes: I JUST REALLY WANT WILL TO HAVE SUPER POWERS, OKAY?

Mike should feel relieved, really. If *Stranger Things* took place in the late 90s/early 00s, they would've been singing a certain Bloodhound Gang song that was every parent's worst nightmare. xD As it stands, the song the kids were singing and dancing to is "Cool It Now" by

New Edition. The title of this story also comes from a modified line from the song (the original was in first person). It's just a cutesy pop song about a boy having a crush on a girl and his friends warning him that he's falling for her too deep, too fast. Sound familiar? ;3 Go look it up so you can get it stuck in your head for the rest of your life. You're welcome.

(Fun bit of trivia: Caleb McLaughlin, who plays Lucas in the show, also starred in BET's mini-series *The New Edition Story* as a young Ricky Bell).

The reason Mike complains about the "human anatomy" joke is because he used a similar line directed at Nancy in season 1, after he caught Steve sneaking into her room. Monopoly is a board game by Hasbro about real estate, and Etch A Sketch is a mechanical drawing game then-produced by Ohio Art Company (they sold it in 2016 to Spin Master). Both have been around since time immemorial and if you don't at least have *some* concept of what they are, did you even really have a childhood?

Trapper Keeper is a brand of binders by Mead that were all the rage in the 80s and 90s. Tuxedo Sam is a character by Sanrio, aka the company that owns Hello Kitty; he's a blue-and-white penguin who wears bowties. *Back to the Future* was released in June 1985 and was the highest-grossing movie that year, and if they don't have at least one tiny reference to it in season 3, I'm going to be incredibly disappointed.

A binary star is a system of two stars that are close enough to each other that the gravitational pull between them causes them to orbit together around a common center of mass. As opposed to a "double star" or a "visual binary" (which are just stars that *look* like they're really close but don't actually orbit around each other), true binary stars are very rare; only about 40 of them are known to date.

In case it isn't obvious, this story was inspired by that video going around of the kids singing and dancing behind the scenes during season 2 filming. I. Adore. These. Children. *So much.*